

Or Die Trying

By Sean Williams with Shane Dix; Illustrated by Leanne Buckley

The natives of Onadax, hearsay went, had fifty different words for dust. Jaina could believe it. The small world was thick with it, in ankle-deep drifts that gathered in corners, thick sediments that fouled droids and other machines, and grit that irritated the eyes. She longed for a vacuum cleaner -- or, more significantly, a bath.

It even got in the way of her concentration. As she Force-leapt into the security compound that was the objective of her mission, her foot slipped and she stubbed her toe on the top of the perimeter wall. The injury was small but annoying. She landed with a wince and a silent curse.

Fortunately, her stumble went unobserved. She stood on the edge of a flat, well-lit area that surrounded the compound's central buildings. ODT took its privacy seriously; she didn't even know what the company's initials stood for. Eight rodent-like Jenet guards in four observation towers watched the open expanse, one tower at each of the perimeter walls' corners. Jaina acknowledged the sense of this: Sometimes the simplest security techniques were the best. Advanced technology might have been able to bypass every electronic eye and ear scanning the compound, but getting across that open area without being seen by eight guards was always going to be difficult. Difficult, that is, for someone without the Force.

Remaining crouched, Jaina quickly checked her combat suit to make sure everything was in place. Then, keeping low, she scurried from cover to make her way across the compound.

A guard from the nearest tower spotted her immediately. Before his finger could push the button to sound the alarm, Jaina dipped into his surface thoughts and changed the notion of *intruder* to a more reassuring *just another mynock*. Onadax had a rampant, mutant population of the silicon-based pests inherited from the small world's early days as an agglomeration of asteroids, so it wasn't difficult to impress the thought upon the Jenet's mind.

The guard moved his finger away from the alarm button as quickly as he had reached for it, and he turned away with a snort. A second guard, one tower along, also noticed her; Jaina performed the same mind trick on him. By the time she'd reached the inner buildings, six of the eight guards had caught direct sight of her. But after the initial guard had gotten on his comlink to the others to complain about the infestation, the remaining guards were already expecting to see what she wanted them to, making it even easier for her to slip by.

The moment she left the open expanse behind her, she changed her gait to a relaxed, confident stroll, slightly favoring her stubbed toe. She headed for the building that *Widowmaker* had targeted from orbit.

Her mission was simple. She was hunting droids -- or, more specifically, droid makers. After the betrayal of Bakura by the treacherous Prime Minister Cundertol, she and her parents had undertaken to find the source of the Human Replica Droid that had made such calamity possible, while at the same time searching for the leader of the Ryn network that had helped them in the past. Before leaving Bakura, she had eased the name "Onadax" from the mind of a former associate of Captain Rufarr, the Wookiee smuggler whose ill fate it was to ferry Cundertol to and from his entechment, the process that placed his life energy into a droid construct. A hint on the ground had led them to the company called simply "ODT." Now she was heading into the ODT compound in the hope of reducing the chances of other HRDs popping up elsewhere.

Jaina touched her chest where the Cundertol HRD had struck her. The injury was long healed, but a memory of the blow still ached. It had been unbelievably powerful, even to a Jedi such as herself. Whatever its source, she couldn't allow these replica droids to spread across the galaxy unchecked.

Threepio had examined signal traffic entering and leaving the main compound and located plans including its access points. The outer door was two meters thick and was secured with durasteel bolts thicker than Jaina's arm. It wasn't going to give way for either technology or Force. But that was all right. She had staked out the compound on her arrival on Onadax and tailed a Yarkora security guard as he changed shift. A gentle mental nudge was all it took to make him drop his security pass so she could collect it. As she approached the door, she waved it at a scanner. When there was no immediate response, Jaina took a step closer and tried again. This time a series of heavy thuds sounded from within the door's locking mechanism. Then, ponderously, as though continents themselves were moving, the door rotated to one side.

Jaina stepped through with her thumb gently covering the activation stud of her lightsaber, knowing that from this point on, her mission would become considerably more dangerous. Threepio had gained access to the basic floor plan of the droid research center, but that was about it. She had no idea how many people worked there, or how many guards patrolled the building, or whether the corridors were booby-trapped. For all she knew, an entire squadron could be waiting around the next corner.

A quick check through the Force reassured her that this wasn't the case. The building was occupied, but not by an army of any description. There were perhaps two dozen people, human and alien, scattered throughout the building. She felt safe assuming that most of these were researchers at work -- plus, perhaps, a token security guard.

Of the minds she could sense around her, one stood out -- one that was subtly different from the others. She had felt such a mind before, and sensing it again now brought her both satisfaction and apprehension.

The huge door shut behind her with a resounding *clang*. She cursed under her breath, expecting the noise to attract attention to her presence. But after waiting silently in anticipation of an alarm, none sounded.

Too easy, she thought, moving slowly on her way along high-ceilinged corridors suffused with a warm and yellow light. She couldn't read the mind ahead of her, but the closer she came to it, the more her gut instinct told her that she was expected.

When she came to the entrance to the room where the being awaited her, she activated her lightsaber. Holding it ready before her, she waved the Yarkora's security pass over the scanner. The door slid smoothly open.

"I can assure you," said a voice immediately, its accent thickly Corellian and cut with a cultured edge, "your weapon won't be necessary."

Jaina stared as a good-looking man in his thirties, dressed in simple black coveralls, came into view. The massive room behind him contained two Loronar Corporation Self-Regulating Droidmakers -- massive, slab-like machines whose sole purpose was to take large quantities of raw material and turn them into droids. Each unit was shaped like a brick, only much, much larger. Stretching into the distance on either side of the man, with no moving parts visible through their semitransparent walls, these "bricks" emitted a deep, almost subsonic hum.

She took a cautious step into the room. She sensed no one else there other than the person standing before her, but her apprehension didn't ebb. "Maybe, but I'm hanging on to it all the same."

The man laughed. "We're all civilized people here."

"You'll understand if I don't take your word on that," Jaina said, moving a couple of steps closer. She kept her eye on him the whole time. He was definitely lying on at least one point: His mind didn't belong to a person at all. Not anymore, anyway.

"Such hostility," he said, casually moving deeper into the room, his back turned toward her as both an invitation to follow him and a gesture of trust. "Let me see if I can work out why you're here. I have no memory of doing business with you, so you can't be a disgruntled client. Your unease suggests that you're not a prospective client, either. Are you a competitor then? A commercial spy? Jedi Knights don't usually get involved in business matters; they're above such things, I hear." He faced her again, holding out his hands in supplication, an exaggerated look of puzzlement on his face. "I'm afraid you're going to have to help me out; I'm running short on ideas."

"My name is Jaina Solo," she began.

"Solo?" The expression on the man's face became one of curiosity. "Any relation to Han Solo?"

"He's my father."

"Ah! My brother was at the Imperial Academy with him. A year below, if I recall." The man nodded keenly. "It's a small galaxy."

"I've just come from Bakura," she said, not allowing herself to be sidetracked.

"And how are our friends, the Ssi-ruuk?"

"I believe the Imperium is currently under heavy fire from the Yuuzhan Vong. We don't know if it will survive. If it falls, that's one more crime we can lay at your feet."

His eyes narrowed. "What does this have to do with me?"

"I'm here because of your HRDs. Do you realize that you put the population of an entire planet at risk?"

"Impossible. Human Replica Droids are designed to *save* lives not end them."

"If that's true, then why do you hide out here in the Minos Cluster? That's not the action of someone who's proud of their achievements."

"Perhaps I'm afraid the Galactic Alliance will try to claim this technology for itself." His smile returned. "No, the reason we are here is to avoid confrontation with people like yourself -- those who are bent on judging us without having heard our side of the story. And also to protect the identity and reputations of our clients -- such as our friend from Bakura."

"Then you admit that Prime Minister Cundertol came to you?"

"I admit only that we had a client from Bakura. I don't know his name. He paid the fee and we provided the service. Then he left. What happened after this is not my concern."

"What happened afterward was that Cundertol murdered the entire crew of the ship that ferried him here in order to protect his secret. He betrayed his world in exchange for a phony stab at immortality."

"There's nothing phony about it, I assure you."

"I'd say that is a matter of opinion."

"And I'd say in return that the galaxy can tolerate many differences of opinion." Before Jaina could respond, the man before her spread his hands, the epitome of reason. "We are running a business here. We cannot be held accountable for what our clients do with their lives following the procedure we offer, no more than we are accountable for their actions prior to it. My responsibility for this Cundertol fellow ended the day he left our labs."

"So it all comes down to the credits, right? As long as they pay, you couldn't care less who they are. It doesn't bother you that you've taken infirm and aged criminals and unleashed them into the galaxy to continue their criminal activities indefinitely."

"You make it sound as though that's all we do."

"What else is there? Uploading stalkers to security networks? Giving psychopaths combat droid parts to play with?"

"We sell life, Jaina Solo, not death," the man returned defensively. "Perhaps if I can explain who I am and how this operation came to be, that might help. My name is Stanton, and but for this procedure I wouldn't be here now. Although the Republic's experimentation with HRDs stalled when their Project Decoy failed, the research didn't stop there. A man called Simonelle picked up where Decoy left off, and he had some success. One of his researchers, Massad Thrumble, actually succeeded in creating a fully operational HRD, which was, unfortunately, employed as an assassin."

"You're not telling me anything new," Jaina said. "Simonelle is dead, and so is Thrumble. We've already checked them out. And the assassin you're talking about was called Guri. She worked for Prince Xizor in the Black Sun organization."

Stanton nodded, as though pleased with her research. "But you're under the impression that she was destroyed after having her memories wiped."

"You're saying she wasn't?"

"Your uncle thought she deserved a chance at a decent life. His attitude was, to our minds, absolutely correct. She had every right to live, as does every sapient being. The fact that she was built rather than born should make no difference whatsoever."

Jaina stepped further into the room, her saber still held at the ready. She knew how fast HRDs could move. "I'm not saying I disagree with that. I'd apply the same principles to her -- or yourself -- as I would any human or alien. But if she's working as an assassin, or engaging in *any* form of criminal activity, then it's my job to bring her down."

"I can assure you she's not," he said, adding smoothly, "so your rough justice won't be necessary. Guri has nothing to do with our business venture now. All she did was allow herself to be used as the template on which our subsequent HRDs were modeled. There are parts based on hers in me, as well as all of our clients. She is our mother, if you like, and is held in great reverence."

"She did this willingly?"

"Of course. She had had her assassin programming removed by then. When my brother met her and learned what she was, he immediately conceived of this venture. They were partners during the R&D phase. Afterward, they went their separate ways."

Jaina noted the reference to a brother again. If this brother was the mastermind behind the operation, he was the one she was after. "This is the same brother my father went through the Academy with?"

"You may have heard of him. His name is Dash Rendar."

She blinked, surprised. "But Dash Rendar's dead."

"On the contrary."

"Then where is he?"

Stanton's smile broadened. "You don't honestly expect me to tell you that, do you?"

"If you insist that you're not doing anything wrong, then why won't your brother talk to us? Or to my uncle, at least?"

"And find himself on the point of a lightsaber?" He shook his head. "I don't think so."

He feinted for the door, and she put herself smoothly in his path. "Your reactions are good," he nodded, raising his hands innocently. "I approve. How many years did it take you to master the lightsaber? To attune to the Force?"

"That's none of your business."

"Ah, but this is *precisely* my business. People should make the most of what they have -- or what they *can* have. You, a Jedi, must surely agree with that. Can't you see the opportunity standing right here before you?"

Stanton's smile was still in place, but his eyes were hard. The reflections of her saber in them seemed to float like tiny, frozen lightning bolts.

"If you're suggesting what I think you're suggesting --"

"Why not? After all, there are no negative side effects. We can make you stronger, more beautiful, taller -- *anything* you want. Using the Ssi-ruuk entechment process, we enable you to retain full connection to the Force. You, Jaina Solo, can be at the vanguard of a brave new regime!"

Jaina tightened her grip on the lightsaber. "I don't think so, Stanton."

"Don't dismiss my offer out of hand. Think of the war against the Yuuzhan Vong -- a war you appear to be losing. How long would their biological weaponry last against an army of HRD soldiers? Think of all the people who have died or been injured since the war began. Is there no one you wouldn't have saved if you could roll back time and give them an indestructible body? Think of yourself. I notice you're favoring one leg slightly. Are you injured? If you were to accept my offer, that kind of thing need never happen again. Think about that."

Stanton moved one step closer, and this time she didn't stop him. "*Think* about it, Jaina, before you say no again so readily."

Jaina did think about it. An image of Tahiri flashed through her mind: Tahiri in a coma, locked in a strange psychic battle with the alien mind trying to take her over. And Anakin, her brother, dead before his time from an injury inflicted by the Yuuzhan Vong.

"Imagine the freedom you will achieve when you've been cut loose from the shackles of flesh and blood," Cundertol had taunted her when the Ssi-ruuk leader Keeramak had threatened her with entechment. "You'll be able to live forever!"

Would it really be so bad?

"I can assure you," Stanton went on, "that our methods have advanced considerably since the early days. There is no pain, no discomfort at all. Only awakening to a new, superior existence. We are also working on ARDs -- All-Species Replica Droids -- so soon it won't just be humans who can take advantage of this technology. We will create new body types that have never existed before in nature. There's no limit to what we'll be able to achieve!"

"The social implications --"

"Are enormous," he cut in enthusiastically. "I know. On one hand, the galaxy isn't ready for HRDs. But consider: We can give people immortality, increased physical resilience and strength, and freedom from all the small irks that make life in the flesh a chore -- including death! Who wouldn't want to do business with us? That this service is currently only available to the rich -- or, as in your case, the very deserving -- is no fault of our own, since the process is extremely expensive. But that won't stop trillions of people from demanding it. No one wants to die, not if they can help it. Let the word get out that there's an alternative to dying and the ensuing riots would make the Yuuzhan Vong invasion look inconsequential by comparison."

"But on the *other* hand," he went on, "isn't it time someone took a stand against life's greatest enemy of all -- death itself? And who better to do that than the Jedi?"

Jaina's stare drifted away from Stanton as she thought about a galaxy free from hunger, disease and mortality. That was indeed the objective of the Jedi movement, surely? And if it meant a possible end to the war, didn't that justify her involvement to the fullest?

But afterward, when the war was won -- what then, when the armies that had laid waste to Shimrra's foul plans returned from victory? Who would keep the HRDs in check, from turning on those who had liberated them from the tyrannies of the flesh? Who would stop them from falling prey to the dark side and destroying everything they had once stood for?

She thought of an invincible Emperor, an immortal Darth Vader, and shuddered.

"No," she said. "And this time I *have* thought about it. The Jedi have seen too often what happens when people have nothing to keep them in check. That you're giving this technology to criminals gives me even less reassurance that your motives are pure."

Stanton Rendar sighed. "I can see that it's going to take more than words to convince you."

She tensed, raising her saber. "Maybe I'm not ready to be *convinced*."

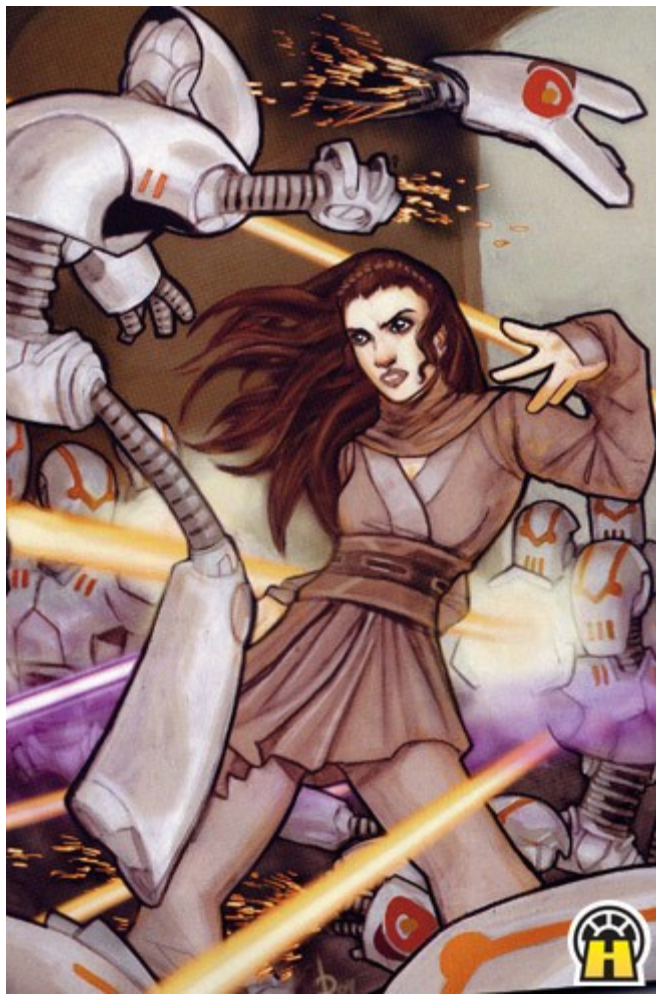
He laughed. "Jaina, we'd never process you against your will! I simply meant that it might take time to convince you, rather than words. And believe me when I tell you that I have all the time in the galaxy. I'll talk to you again one day, when you're aged and frail and your parents are gone; when your children are older than you are now, and death is lurking in the nearby days ahead -- and I look exactly the same as I do today. Perhaps then you'll be more receptive to what I have to offer."

"I wouldn't count on it, Stanton," she said, taking another step forward. "And besides, I intend to be talking to you a lot sooner than that. It'll be one day in the not-too-distant future when you're safely locked up and unable to hurt anyone. Or perhaps even dismantled for spare parts."

Stanton sobered. "Life is all we have, girl. Do you think I'm about to let you take it away from me? I plan to live forever or--"

"Or die trying," Jaina finished for him. "Yes, very droll. My issue with you is not your life or how it is maintained, but what you *do* with it. More specifically, how your clients use the second chance you give them. If you can't be made to see that you have a responsibility to ensure that no one dangerous gets their hands on this technology, then --"

"Spare me the rhetoric," Stanton interrupted. He glanced at a chronometer set in the wall to his right. "I have no more interest in it than I do in this conversation. So, if you don't mind, I think I'd like you to leave now."



"I have no intention of leaving here without you, Stanton."

"Really?" At a clap of his hands, two lines of ten sleek combat droids filed out from behind the two Loronar Droidmakers. "Word spreads when people ask after ODT. I knew Jedi were looking for me, so naturally I prepared for the worst."

Jaina smiled casually as she surveyed the droids. She adopted a defensive stance, bracing herself for attack. "You'll have to do better than that," she said.

"Of course. No droid could ever hope to be a match for a full Jedi unless it's a Jedi *inside* a droid." A smile flickered, then vanished again. "But your death was never my intention, Jaina Solo. While we've been talking, my shuttle has been warming up and my staff has evacuated into it. We'll take our leave now, while you fight your way past these."

"Your shuttle will never break orbit."

"A lame threat at best," he said, grinning widely. "I suspect you'll be a little too busy to sound the alarm. You see, not only will you have to dispense with these primitive fellows, but you'll have to do it as quickly as possible. In about five minutes this whole complex will be going up in a ball of flame hot enough to incinerate any mere flesh within it."

She gritted her teeth, wondering if he was bluffing. "You'd destroy your entire facility just to cover your tracks?"

"We can always build another one. That is, in part, why our fees are so high." Stanton executed a small, facetious bow. "I bid you farewell, Jaina Solo. I hoped briefly that you might see reason. You would be perfect for our cause: such potential, such vitality! But I guess it's not to be, this time. Rest assured, though, that if we do meet again, our conversation will end very differently."

He hurried away as the combat droids moved in to attack Jaina. The last she saw of him was his back disappearing around the corner of a Droidmaker -- and then she was parrying furiously, sending energy bolts and droid body parts flying in all directions. The Force flowed through her like an invigorating fire, responding to every demand she placed upon it -- enhancing her senses, quickening her reflexes, enabling her to anticipate her opponent's moves a split second before they'd begun them. The combat droids seemed to move in slow motion, flailing ineffectually at her, practically begging to be cut down.

The last one fell in a shower of sparks, loosing one final shot that missed her by a clear meter. It ricocheted into the distance, discharging harmlessly against the far wall. Jaina straightened and surveyed the carnage of dead metal strewn about the floor, fizzing and sparking.

She reached out with the Force in search of Stanton, but there was no hint of him anywhere within the complex. His shuttle had taken off; he was long gone.

Jaina cursed. Five minutes, he'd said. More than three had passed. Cutting her losses, she Force-somersaulted out of the ring of droid parts and hurried through the door. The exit from the compound was closed. Opening it with her security pass took almost five seconds, each one an agonized eternity. As the massive portal lumbered aside and she ran through it, a bolt of energy crackled over her shoulder, let loose by one of the Jenet perimeter guards. She zigzagged across the open expanse, deflecting anything that came too close with her saber.

At the perimeter wall, she put all her concentration into her leap over the top. Laser fire singed her back as she reached the apex of her jump and began to fall. She rolled to absorb the impact and was up and running before the Jenet guards could take another shot. Under cover of night, and with plenty of dark alleys to hide in, she was confident that no one would catch her --

The compound exploded behind her with a sound so loud it momentarily deafened her. Bright yellow light flared at her back, and the shock wave knocked her from her feet. She flew a meter or so through the air, curling herself into a ball so that when she hit the ground she rolled and sprang back onto her feet, still running. A few meters further, when it was apparent that the worst of it was over, Jaina stopped and looked back to the burning building.

Nothing had survived. The compound was a blazing ruin. All evidence of the Droidmakers was gone, along with the enterprise that had operated on Onadax.

It made her furious to think that Stanton had gotten away. The memory of his smug smile irked her as she turned and headed for the *Millennium Falcon*. But she couldn't afford to linger too long. And, she reminded herself, her mission hadn't been a total failure. The search hadn't come to a dead end. She had a name now. That was something to work with, at least.

I hope you're right, Stanton, she thought, relishing the twinge in her big toe that told her she was still alive, still her. I hope we do meet again some day. Because when we do, I'm going to make you pay for everything that happened back on Bakura! Or I'll die trying myself....

She smiled at the thought. It gave her a grim sort of comfort to think this wasn't over. Snapping her lightsaber back onto her belt, she made her way through the dusty and disreputable alleyways of Onadax back to where her parents awaited her in the *Falcon*.